

News

Not in Kansas Anymore

February 10, 2006

Wisconsin State Rep. Terese Berceau became concerned when she started seeing polls that showed more Americans wanted “alternative viewpoints to evolution,” primarily intelligent design, she said, taught in public schools. “Evolution is not a viewpoint,” Berceau added. And she wants the Wisconsin Legislature to agree.

Berceau announced a bill this week that seeks to “stem the growing tide of intelligent design and other specious science.” The three-sentence bill says that anything taught as science in science classes should be “testable,” describe “only natural processes,” and be consistent with science as [described by the National Academy of Sciences](#), which has said intelligent design is not science.

The legislation is the first of its kind in the country, and University of Wisconsin at Madison faculty members, five of whom Berceau consulted, applauded the bill as strong support for teachers who have been caught in the middle of the controversy. “I think it makes Wisconsin look good the same way [embracing alternative theories to evolution] made Kansas look silly,” said Alan Attie, a biochemistry professor at Wisconsin and one of the faculty members Berceau consulted.

The bill may well not pass, but the collaboration between a legislator and professors represents a path for scientists who want to take the offensive in the evolution wars, rather than just responding. Berceau said that “academics have a tendency to lie low,” but was glad they got involved in this case because of what she called a threat to the “science pipeline.”

Berceau was careful to point out that the bill, which never actually mentions intelligent design, would not kick ID out of schools completely — it just could not be taught as science. Attie explained that “we’re not saying that intelligent design shouldn’t be discussed. It’s a beautiful teaching opportunity for talking about what is science.”

In December, a federal judge in Pennsylvania [ruled](#) that intelligent design is indelibly tied to its religious underpinnings, and that teaching it in a public school class violates the Constitutional separation of church and state. That case came in response to the Dover, Pa., school board voting intelligent design into the curriculum in 2004. Also in 2004, the school board in Grantsburg, Wis., mulled over including alternative theories to evolution, before backing off and settling on language that said students should “be able to explain the scientific strengths and weaknesses of evolutionary theory.”

Sean Carroll, a professor of genetics at Wisconsin, said that “in light of the federal court ruling that intelligent design is not science, but the progeny of creationism, districts in our state should be dissuaded from repeating the folly of Dover. Why not codify that in statute form?”

Rep. Spencer Black, who co-sponsored the bill, said that it stands little chance of being approved. He said that Rep. Debi Towns, chair of the Education Committee, “already said she won’t give it a hearing.”

Michael Behe, a Lehigh University biology professor who testified that intelligent design is science in the Dover case, suggested in an e-mail message that it would be bad pedagogy to scare teachers away from addressing intelligent design in class. “If a student is told that some questions are banned, then they’ll think their teachers are being secretive and may learn to distrust them,” he said.

Robert Crowther, a spokesman for the Science and Culture Center of the Discovery Institute, which supports intelligent design, said that the bill “seems like sort of a draconian measure.” Crowther passed the bill off as a reach for publicity with the University of Wisconsin’s

Darwin Day coming up this weekend. “They’re kind of creating a problem so they can put forth this solution they have when there really isn’t a problem,” Crowther said.

Michael Cox, a Wisconsin professor of biochemistry whom Berceau consulted on the bill, said that most faculty members hadn’t even heard of intelligent design until the Grantsburg situation hit the local papers. Now, he said, even though the bill is unlikely to pass, it’s a good way to have legislators start talking about the issue. “I think the discussion itself is extremely important,” Cox said. Berceau’s office is already receiving more calls than ever before, according to a staff member.

Berceau added that it’s important for Wisconsin to project a science-friendly image. “The governor ... is trying to develop our state as a center for biotech,” she said, adding that a 2000 Fordham Foundation report gave Wisconsin zero of three possible points for evolution instruction in classrooms. “We don’t want to become Kansas,” Berceau said. “Biotech companies are coming to Wisconsin — not Kansas - for a reason.”

— **David Epstein**